

CB Radio Triumphs In The Digital Era!

Our "Mature" Radio Friend Is Alive And Well Just When We Need It Most

By Alan Dixon

It's time to clear the air on a few radio issues. A number of our regular readers have insisted on more 11-meter CB radio news in *Pop'Comm's* "On-The-Go Radio" column. Although CB radio interest remains at a high level, CB news items have become somewhat scarce. Please note that this is not a sign of a dwindling population of CB enthusiasts. It's quite the *opposite*. A leveling-off of "new" developments in that medium marks a sustained maturity in the world of 27-MHz CB radio. And that's not a bad thing at all.

"Just home high a level of interest does the CB Radio Service enjoy? A university study is bound to surprise more than just a few folks."

Okay, I just said that interest in CB radio remains high. But all too often, I hear the comment made by various people in radio communications that CB radio is on the way out. Almost invariably, these individuals assert that the channels have gone silent. Then, when quizzed as to when the last time any of these folks got on the CB channels, either to operate or to monitor, the answer always leads in the same direction: "Oh, I gave up CB radio years ago," or "I got rid of my old CB set back in the 1980s." Really! Just how then do such "geniuses" have any idea what is happening on the 11-meter band? They don't.

Just how high a level of interest does the CB Radio Service enjoy then, anyway? That's really difficult to quantify. However, in recent months I have had the privilege of connecting with a rare, yet well-timed university-level study of CB radio. And its findings are bound to surprise

more than just a few folks who think they know what's happening in CB radio.

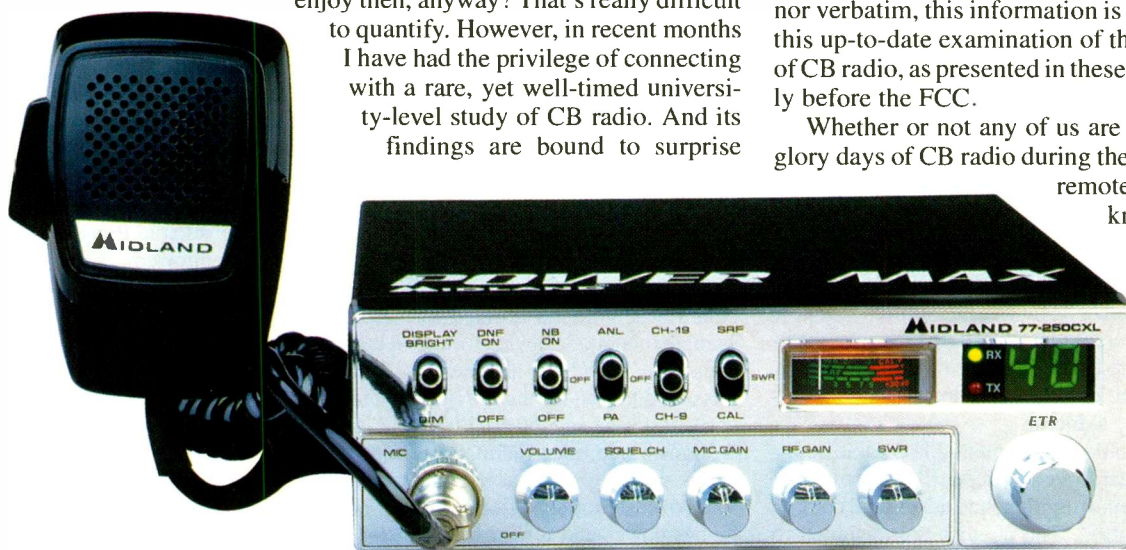
Protect Your Slice

First though, we need to be aware that there is an ominous new force poised to crush 27-MHz CB radio. This force is political rather than technology or market-based. Yet, it has nothing to do with any rules violations or abuses in the 11-meter band. The threat is the FCC's advancement of Broadband over Power Lines (BPL) technology. There are numerous organizations and individuals standing up to have HF bands in the Amateur Radio Service protected from the interference that will be caused by this defective technology. But who is standing up for CB radio, which is also in the HF spectrum bands? Not many, it appears initially. Nevertheless, I have filed lengthy formal comments stressing the importance of protecting the 11-meter band from BPL interference. This was done in the interest of all who use and rely upon CB radio communications (*Pop'Comm* publisher *CQ Communications* also addressed the threat to CB in its FCC comments. -ed)

This article contains much of the information I presented in this effort to protect CB radio. I had filed comments originally in the Notice of Inquiry (ET 03-104) period of the BPL proceedings last year, and again in the Notice of Proposed Rule Making (ET 04-37) phase this spring. While neither complete nor verbatim, this information is an accurate representation of this up-to-date examination of the popularity and importance of CB radio, as presented in these docketed comments presently before the FCC.

Whether or not any of us are old enough to remember the glory days of CB radio during the 1970s, nearly everyone even remotely familiar with CB has some knowledge of that decade's greatest fad. But fads, by definition, come and go.

CB radio continues to dominate the highways of North America in even greater numbers than in the mid-1980s. This is the Midland 77-250CXL classic chrome-face CB mobile. (Photo courtesy of Midland Radio)



When the CB craze of the '70s faded as rapidly as it arrived many people both within and without the CB world naturally concluded that CB radio was either dead or dying. Aside from the fad though, how has CB radio popularity fared over the last two-plus decades? Even disregarding the entire CB craze phenomenon of the mid-1970s, a large number of communications volunteers and hobbyists, as well as occupational users and professionals, seem to feel that interest in CB radio has been on a steady decline over the past 20 years. But is this assumption valid?

The Rest Of The CB Story— Without Jumping To Conclusions

For the many of us who lived during the CB fad in the mid-1970s, it's all too easy, though not necessarily accurate, to conclude a declining interest. In 1976, all 23 CB channels were loaded with traffic, in nearly every part of the country. The three main trucking channels then (10, 15, and 21) were busy around the clock, in even the sparsest areas within range of any major highway. Today, truckers nearly everywhere in the United States are on one channel: Channel 19. The remainder of the 40 channels we have today are largely quiet, except for the daytime DXers on channels 35 through 40 on sideband, and one or two lower channels with AM DXers. So concluding that CB radio popularity is on the decline is simple, right?

Maybe not. Jumping to such a conclusion robs us of some highly relevant realities. How can we see what's really going on? In the course of my own research over the years, I've noticed an unfortunate dearth of statistics on CB radio use, sales, manufacturing and imports, or anything else telling. Finally, in early 2003, I was contacted by a group of researchers at Michigan State University. There, the National Science Foundation (NSF) was launching a major multi-year research project on CB radio popularity in the United States, and researchers were then in an early round of source material gathering. I remained in the loop with this ongoing research, and what they have found may surprise you. We are privileged here at *Pop'Comm* that research associate Carol Ting has provided us with rudimentary statistics for use in compiling facts for this report.

Conventional Wisdom

Just how big was the CB radio fad of the 1970s? Staggeringly so! CB radio sales soared from just under two million units in 1974 to over 11 million in 1976. Sales volume began plummeting just a year later, however. By 1979, annual sales volume had dipped to just under two million; about the same sales level seen just before the fad.

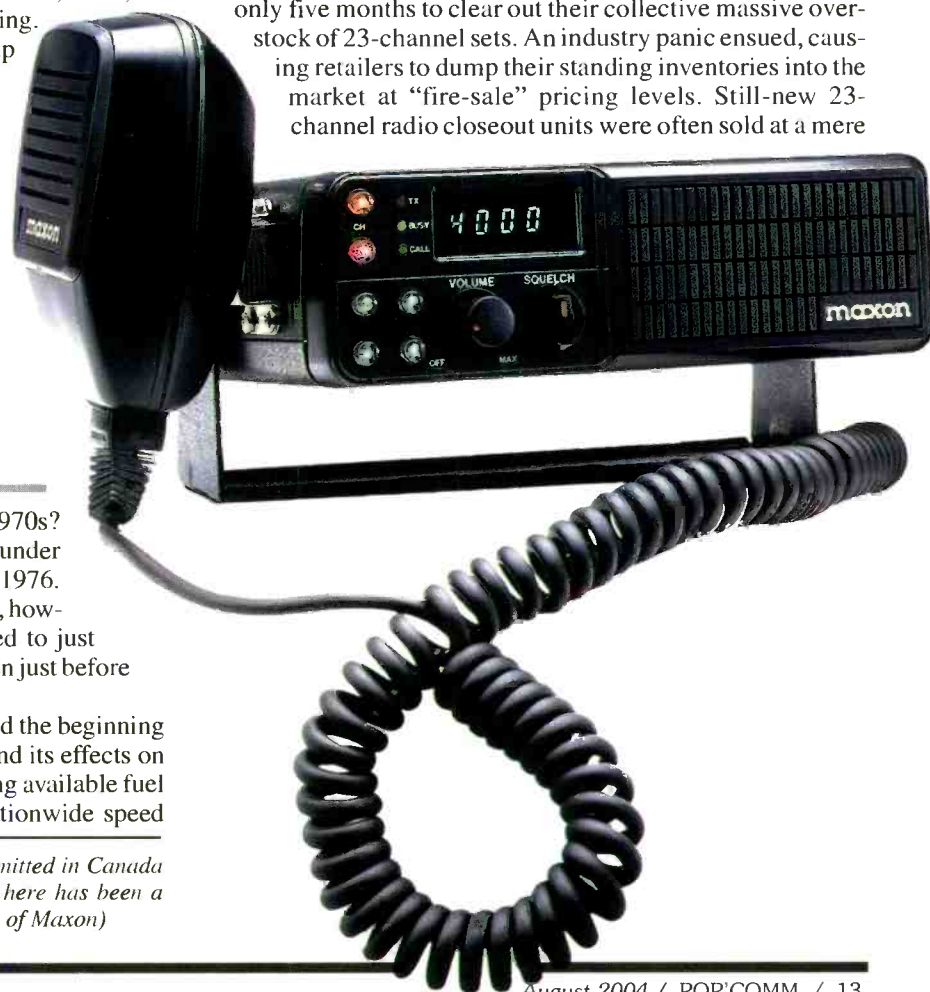
Research shows two main factors that spurred the beginning of the CB fad. One was the Arab oil embargo and its effects on motorists. These included the difficulty in finding available fuel while on the highway, the reduction of the nationwide speed

limit to 55 MPH, and motorists' keen interest in the related law-enforcement activity. The second factor was massive media attention in newspapers and magazines. Additionally, several country-western genre songs about truckers' exploits with CB radio became crossover hits, assuring airplay on nearly every radio station featuring any form of contemporary music. Television shows and movies rapidly followed.

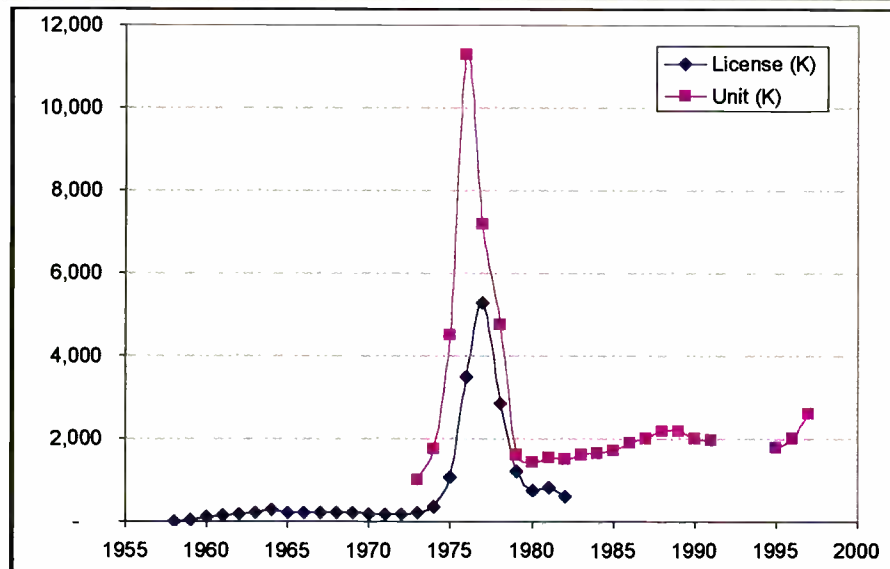
Far more difficult to track, though, are the circumstances that brought the fad to an abrupt *demise*. Several interrelated factors came into play. The first was a direct effect of the fad's rapid onset: Demand began to outstrip supply. In 1975 alone, some 12 million units were ordered for retail sale, but only five million were delivered. Distributors routinely submitted duplicate orders in the hopes of receiving adequate quantities.

New manufacturers entered the business, and related stock market performance would come to bear a strange resemblance to the Internet dot-com business boom of two decades later. This market would prove to be sorely optimistic, and caused distributors to amass excessive stockpiles of CB radio units. The marketing momentum at work in this case spiraled into what economists describe as a "hog-cycle" supply-demand imbalance which, as researcher Ting succinctly notes, typically leads to a dramatic market correction.

Another factor resulted from industry lobbying the FCC to authorize more CB channels. In the summer of 1976, the Commission responded by increasing the number of channels from 23 to 40, to be effective January 1, 1977. Sales of 23-channel CB radios were ordered to cease after that date, but sales of 40-channel units were not permitted at all *prior* to that same date. This shortsighted transition policy gave vendors only five months to clear out their collective massive overstock of 23-channel sets. An industry panic ensued, causing retailers to dump their standing inventories into the market at "fire-sale" pricing levels. Still-new 23-channel radio closeout units were often sold at a mere



Will high-power GMRS mobile transceivers be permitted in Canada in the near future? The Maxon SM-4000 pictured here has been a popular mobile GMRS radio. (Photo courtesy of Maxon)



The rise and fall and rise of Citizen's Band Radio in the U.S.

20 percent of cost, just in time for a heavy Christmas shopping season!

Then, as the year 1977 dawned, new CB radios with all 40 required channels typically sold at **10 times** the most recent pricing of the otherwise comparable new CB radios, sold only a month before. And, the new 40-channel radios were in *relatively* short supply. The hog-cycle effect of overstocking, coupled with a disastrous FCC transition policy, drove up CB radio prices (again, *relatively*) while choking the supply. The result was a steep plummet in CB radio sales, with a supply-and-demand dynamic that fueled an uncontrolled downward spiral from which the industry never *totally* recovered.

The Real Deal

When we step back and look at the bigger picture, however, we can see that, except for the "spike" caused by the rise and fall of the CB fad, CB radio popularity had only *increased* over the 45 years that 27-MHz CB radio has existed. That's right—consumer enthusiasm has steadily *increased*, even since 1980, contrary to the uninformed opinions often given as "fact" by those who no longer personally support CB radio.

In the statistical science of mathematics, there is a process known as *normalization*. This process legitimately discounts aberrations that are in fact statistically insignificant when considering a larger range of data. (Several times *larger*, that is, than the aberration in question.) Therefore, when we look at the approximately 45-year span of CB radio

history, even just roughly normalizing the approximately four-year spread during which the CB fad occurred, we can clearly see that *CB radio sales have increased nearly steadily over the entire span*.

The Nineties And Beyond

The number of new CB radio units sold topped one million annually, circa 1973. This was up from about 100,000 new units licensed in 1960. *Overall*, sales had stepped up to roughly 1.8 million annually by 1980. Since 1980, new unit sales steadily increased to just over two million during 1989. After that time, sales dipped slightly to just under two million annually until 1995.

After 1995, CB radio annual sales have increased sharply through 1997, *at a rate closely approximating that of the rise of the CB fad*, circa 1973 to 1975! It is interesting to note that during these same years of the late 1990s, FRS radio was introduced. It appears at this point that FRS radio popularity has complemented, not competed with, 27-MHz CB radio popularity.

To date, there is no real accounting for the tens of millions of CB radios already in existence. The Michigan State University group is still in the process of investigating the status and use, as well as the disposal, of previously sold units. Nevertheless sales of new CB radio sets is an unimpeachable measure of public interest in 11-meter radio. With facts in hand, rather than personally biased and narrow opinion, we can assert with confidence that those who claim that CB radio popularity is dead or dying simply do not know

whereof they speak. CB radio is unquestionably alive and, moreover, *growing*.

There are more *new* CB radio sets on the road now than since 1980, *by far*. Some *20 times* the number of new 27-MHz CB radios are being put into use *every year* than in 1973, and the number of new radios going on the air is rapidly approaching the figures of 1975! The fact is, the number of new 11-meter CB radios being put on the air is not only *increasing*, but it's increasing at an increasing *rate* (indicating an upward spiral), as well.

If that's not enough, the American Trucking Association, Inc., reports 1.68 million Class 8 (semi-trailer) commercial trucks on the road nationwide in recent years. It is a well-known and undisputed fact that nearly all of them rely on CB radio 24/7/365 for tactical (operational) communications, *professionally*.

Why Would The NSF Care?

Now, ask yourself this: What interest does the NSF have in CB radio? The NSF is an entity created by the federal government to contract with university graduate schools to conduct research of potential interest to the government, particularly the Department of Defense (DOD).

Hmmm...interesting...the military concerned with CB radio? While we're not as yet privy to the greater purpose of the study, you can draw your own conclusions. Could this have something to do with citizen preparedness during a protracted War on Terrorism? If so, why CB radio? Why not be more concerned with cellular telephones and wireless Internet connectivity?

Cell phones frequently fail during widespread emergencies and at mass casualty incidents. Repeaters, trunked or conventional, can certainly fail, and high-power commercial and amateur radio equipment drains batteries far more quickly than does a simple 4-watt transmitter. This much we know.

CB, The Next Generation?

Got CB? If not get it, and get on the air. Get back into operating CB, and show the uninformed how courteously and professionally radio communications are conducted. We remain in the midst of an ongoing War on Terrorism, where preparedness is never optional. If you're not already on 11 meters, it's high time to catch up with so many consumers and add 11-meter radio to your "commo" arsenal! ■